

*Khamyang:  
An endangered language of Assam.*

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**1. Introduction:** This paper is on Khamyang, an undocumented and endangered language spoken by the Khaymang of Tai group found primarily in Tinsukia district of Assam as well as in adjacent parts of Arunachal Pradesh. The data presented in this paper originate from fieldwork on Pawaimukh village of Tinsukia District of Assam. The Khamyang people now use *Asamiya* as their regular conversation. The Khamyang are shifted to *Asamiya*. The older people of Khamyang use the khamyang language in a very limited situation.

**2. Khamyang, an endangered language:**

There are some factors to assess the state of endangerment of a language. These factors are mainly:

**F1:** Intergenerational language transmission

**F2:** Absolute number of speakers

**F3:** Proportion of speakers within the total population

**F4:** Trends in existing language domains (deals with who speaks the language, when, with whom, and on what topic)

**F5:** Response to new domains and media (mainly concerned with the extent to which the language copes with modernity)

**F6:** Materials for language education and literacy

**F7:** Governmental language policies

**F8:** Community members' attitudes towards their own language

**F9:** Amount and quality of documentation

Except for F2, all factors are assessed on a scale from 0 to 5, where 5 indicates that the language is safe, used on a regular basis, supported by language policies, etc. F4 deals with those who speak the language, when, with whom, and about what topics. F5 concerns the extent to which the language copes with modernity. Other factors are self-explanatory.

The Khamyang people are mainly distributed in 14 villages in Assam. These villages are as follows:

1. Golaghat District: Rajapukhuri Shyam Gaon.

2. Tinsukia District:

- a. Margherita
- b. Duliajan
- c. Digboi
- d. Pawaimukh
- e. Borgolai

3. Sivasagar District: a. Salapathar Shyam Gaon.

4. Jorhar District:
- b. Rahan Shyam Gaon.
  - c. Sala Moniting.
  - d. Disangpani
  - e. Ouguri Shyam Gaon.
  - a. Balijan Shyam Gaon.
  - b. Na-Shyam Gaon.
  - c. Betabari Shyam Gaon.

**2.1. Absolute number of speakers and Proportion of speakers within the total population:** The speaker of the Khamyang language exist only in Pawaimukh village. This village is situated under the subdivision of Margherita in Tinsukia district. The current total population is approximately 165. This estimate does not include children under 18 . The young generation of the Khamyang does not know their language. The young generation use *Asamiya* in their colloquial speech. Only the kinship words from the Khamyang are used by the young generation in their regular speech .

The total population can be categorized in terms of their proficiency level and age groups, as shown in the table given below.

	Gen1	Gen2	Gen3	Gen4	Total
FS	22	25	--	--	47
NF	0	10	<b>33</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>56</b>
NS	0	07	<b>68</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>306</b>

Abbreviations used in the table are defined as follows:

- Proficiency
  - FS—Fluent Khamyang speakers
  - NF—Nonfluent speakers with passive understanding of the language
  - NS—Nonspeakers with little or no passive understanding
- Age groups
  - Generation 1 (Gen1)—65 to 80 years old
  - Generation 2 (Gen2)—45 to 65 years old
  - Generation 3 (Gen3)—18 to 45 years old
  - Generation 4 (Gen4)— under 18 childrens

The majority of Khamyang residents belongs to third and fourth generations. I estimate that there are approximately 137 children and young adults (Gen4) and 165 adults (Gen1 to Gen3). It is difficult to correlate age with proficiency.

**2.2 Intergenerational language transmission (F1):** The language is used mostly by the parental generations (Gen2 and Gen3). Older speakers are integrated in the community, and there is some inter-generational use of the language. The youngest Khamyang speakers are of child-bearing age (Gen3), but they do not usually use Khamyang with their children. As a result, Khamyang is not now the dominant language in most families, and it is no longer being learned as a first language. Hence, the language is moribund.

**2.3 Trends in existing language domains :** The domains of the use of Khamyang are “dwindling” . For example, communication in Khamyang is quite rare. It occurs mainly at home between husband and wife, parents and children (but not in all households of the community), and during some private conversations outside of the home area (between the older age groups). In all other domains only *Asamiya* is used.

**2.4 Response to new domains and media :** The language is now inactive. Khamyang is restricted to a single domain (private conversation); it is not used in new domains. The younger generation use only the kinship words like *pu*, *me*, . The Assamese and English words are used in new domains.

**2.5 Community members’ attitudes towards their own language (F8).**

Brenzinger notes that if “communities do not meet the challenges of modernity with their language, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatized.” This hypothesis holds true for Khamyang. The Khamyang people are scattered in different areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. *Asamiya* is used by all as a common lingua franca for intragroup communications. In this context it is worthwhile to mention that *Moran*, has now become extinct as all the speakers of the Moran community have adopted *Asamiya* as their first language, making a case of total language shift. In the context of Khamyang, it has been already in the process of a total language shift. *Asamiya* is now often and only language spoken on a regular basis at home. Economic trends have also accelerated the decline of Khamyang. *Asamiya* is needed in all business transactions; it has become associated with upward social mobility, leaving Khamyang as the language of a stigmatized traditional past. These socio-economic factors affect the speakers’ attitudes towards their language, a crucial factor for its survival .

During my field trip, I noticed that:

- (1) Only the Gen1 speaker can speak fluently the Khamyang language, and they using the language at home .
- (2) Some of the Gen2 speakers can speak it fluently and some are good in understanding the language. They sometimes make an effort to speak Khamyang with their parents and wife.

(3) The Gen3 and Gen4 can not speak the Khamyang. Gen3 understands the language a little bit but Gen4 do not. But both Gen3 and Gen4 use only the kinship words in their regular conversations with *Asamiya*.

## **2.6 Governmental and institutional language policies, including official**

**status and use (F7):** The Constitution of India makes provision for ‘... free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.’

The **National Policy on Education of 1968** spoke about the regional languages and the three Language Formula. The 1986 Policy reiterated the earlier stand. The **States Reorganization Commission** had asked the Union Government to elucidate a policy outline for education in mother tongue at the secondary stage. The **All India Council for Education** recommended the adoption of the Three Language Formula (TLF) in September 1956. The endorsement for this formula came from various directions. It was adopted later at the Chief Ministers’ conference. According to this proposal, three languages would be taught at the secondary-school level: English, the local language, and Hindi; in Hindi speaking areas, another Indian or European language would be taught.

The UNESCO’S three basic policies are :

1. The UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality.

2. The UNESCO encourages bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality, and as a prerequisite for linguistically diverse societies.

3. The UNESCO supports language as an essential component of intercultural education as it wishes to contribute to understanding between different population groups and to ensure respect for fundamental rights.

We have not seen any process to take the Khamyang as a medium of primary education. Although, Khamyang has own script to write.

## **2.7 Amount and quality of documentation (F8) and Materials for language**

**education and literacy (F5).** The Khamyang has its own script and it is mainly used in religious writings. Writing system for a language may bring pride to the language community. Nothing in language has yet come out in printed letters and the fact that the member of the Khamyang community seem unconcerned about the need to have their literacy and intellectual outputs in print. Naturally the language is now almost inactive.

Writing the vernacular may alter or interrupt language transmission as a consequence of the misconception that, once a language is written, it is safe . Speakers and writers may also help to widen the range of use of the language. New generations can develop, from children’s literature to diaries, to more practical uses like writing re-

ports or notes. Creating orthographic conventions for an endangered language may also help safeguard that language. Vernacular education is often seen as a key activity in sustaining languages against the pressure of dominant languages and although “the existence of linguistic descriptions is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for language maintenance” (Muhlhausler), it is an essential condition for language revitalization. Once language shift is near completion, revitalization is possible only if the speakers have access to descriptive and written materials in the language.

**2.8 Summary.** The following table summarizes the previous discussion.

Factors	Rating	Comments
F1:Transmission	0	The language is no longer being learned as a mother tongue by children at home.
F2: Number of total speakers	47	These speakers have varying levels of Speakers fluency.
F3: Ratio of speakers	15%	About 15% of the total population speaks the language (47 out of 306).
F4: Language domains	1	The domains are limited/dwindling.
F5: New domains	0	The language is inactive, not used in any new domains.
F6: Education	0	The language is not used in school.
F7: Policies	0	Vernacular education is often seen as a major factor in sustaining languages, but we have not seen any such situation.
F8: Attitude	0	People are not concerned about their language loss.
F9: Documentation	0	A very little process has been seen.

Table 4: Assessing the language vitality of Khamyang  
**This results point out that Khamyang is moribund and highly endangered.**

### 3. Following is a phonological and a grammatical sketch of the Khamyang Language.

#### 3.1. Phononology:

##### 3.1.1. Consonant Phonemes:

There are 16 consonants in the Khamyang language. One of the main characteristics of the consonant system is the existence of a glotal stop. Another major characteristic is that each letter of the Khamyang is pronounced with ‘ɑ’ sound inherently attached.

	Biabial	dental/ Alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t	c	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops	p <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>		k <sup>h</sup>	
Voiced stops	b				
Nasals	m	n		ŋ	
Voiceless fricative		s			h
Semi-vowel		y			
Lateral		l			

##### 3.1.2. Vowel Phonemes :

	front	mid	back
Close	i		ɯ      u
Close mid	e		ɤ      ɔ
Open mid	ɛ		ɔ
Open		ɒ, ɑ	

These vowel phonemes cannot be used as vowel letters. Indeed, these are symbols. “To write the vowel letter, the vowel symbol must be fixed with the consonant letter to make a word.” (Gohain, Aimeyakhang : Elementary Tai Primer with Grammar.-04)

3.2. Khamyang is a monosyllabic language. One of the main characteristics of the language is that each word has several tones. Different tones makes different meanings. There are six tones (Morey, Stephen: The Tai Language of Assam- A Grammar and texts-161) in the Khamyang language. The tones are

1. mid level with slight fall
2. high level then falling
3. low, falling and glottalized
4. high level then falling with glottal ending
5. low falling
6. level, with possible rise at the end.

For example, the syllable ‘*mα*’, shows five of these tones.

- mα*<sup>1</sup> shoulder
- mα*<sup>2</sup> come
- mα*<sup>3</sup> crazy
- mα*<sup>4</sup> horse
- mα*<sup>6</sup> dog

#### 4.0. Some salient features of Khamyang grammar:

4.1. The Khamyang language follows the **Subject+Verb+Object** pattern in the formation of sentences in the language, as in

**kao kin k<sup>h</sup>ao** (I eat rice)

#### **4.2. Personal pronouns:**

Singular	Plural
1st person kao (I)	hao (we)
2nd person mao (You)	su (You)
3rd person mūn (he/she)	k <sup>h</sup> ao (they)

Some notable features have been seen in personal pronoun, these are:

1. The personal pronouns do not indicate the gender, this means that the personal pronouns are neutral.
2. The word **cao** is used to respect or honour someone or a senior person as the situation may demand.
3. There is no declension of pronouns in cases. Help words are used to indi-



cate the cases of pronouns.

#### **4.3. Gender:**

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There are mainly two genders operating in the language. but some natural words are always in the masculine gender ( sun, moon,etc) and some words are always in feminine gender ( such as river, toe, the alphabets )

Separate word are used to indicate the both masculine and feminine gender.

masculine

pɯ 'father'

sai 'elder brother'

nɔŋ sai 'younger brother'

feminine

mɛ 'mother'

pi sai 'slder sister'

nɔŋ sɔ 'younger sister'

Most of the nouns are in common gender. Generally help words are used with common words to indicate the masculine or feminine gender.

masculine

pɯ lɔŋ 'father-in-law'

luk sai 'son'

feminine

mɛ sɔ 'mother-in-law'

luk sɔ 'daughter'

In case of animal, different words are used to indicate masculine gender. If the animal is biped, *f*u is added before the noun, and if the animal is quadruped *t*<sup>h</sup>uk is added. But the same word (i.e. *m*ɛ) is used to indicate feminine gender.

kɔn p<sup>h</sup>ɯ 'cock'

kɔn mɛ 'hen'

sɔn t<sup>h</sup>uk 'male elephant'

sɔn mɛ 'female elephant'

#### **4.4.Number:**

There are two numbers in Khamyang. To indicate singular number, *nɯŋ* is used after the noun words and to indicate plural number *nam* (many), *nam nam* (too many), *lai* (many), *lai lai* (too many), *tɯŋ lɯŋ* (all), *k*<sup>h</sup>ɔ (a suffix for plural), *p*<sup>h</sup>uŋ (a suffix for plural) etc. are used.

#### **4.5. Classifier:**

Classifiers are used in the Khamyang language according to the shapes and

sizes of things. Separate words are used to indicate man and animal and these are classifiers of nouns. To indicate ‘man’ ‘kən’ is used and to indicate ‘animal’ the word ‘p<sup>h</sup>uŋ’ is used. For example,

kən p<sup>h</sup>u (The man)

man p<sup>h</sup>uŋ (The cows)

p<sup>h</sup>uŋ kai (The hens)

There are some other classifications, such as ‘lam’ (classifiers for long things, *ni lam* ‘the pen’), *p<sup>h</sup>a* (classifier for a fall of rain and classifier for cloths, *p<sup>h</sup>a p<sup>h</sup>un nuŋ* ‘a piece of cloth’), ‘luŋ’ (a classifier for many kinds of things).

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